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movement permeated everything, kept it moving, kept it questioning.

"At the time, we—L.A.—were still looked at as the Knack, hot tubs and white wine," Roecker says. "We rebelled against suburban boring. It was only a year after Vietnam ended. Hollywood was decaying. We used to go to the old reception halls. We had one last party."

L.A. grew up a wild child, unchaperoned. It was that uncertain and off-kilter atmosphere—fidgety and angry shot through with humor—that drew McKenna to its center, first as a fan then as a documentarian. "In the beginning the music industry here ignored it. So there was nothing at stake. Whereas in New York you had a very serious artistic community," McKenna explains. Her first movement missive (now yellowed but framed as a document in the show) was for The Times in 1978, covering the closing of the Masque. ("They thought I was a narc!") Though the scene tumbled forward quickly, McKenna sees distinct bookends: "It started for me with the Damned, 'Neat Neat Neat' and the Masque. . . . There was a real shift around 1980. X arrived, heroin was on the scene and Darby Crash's suicide. That was the year that [Slash magazine's] Claude Bessy left and moved to London."

And that, it would seem, was that.

Not quite, if the 1,000-plus opening-night crowd at "Forming" is any indication. "I think," says Martin, "what this tells us is, here's a period of time and look at how it resonated with people. There's a lot of myth that has grown up over it. It reflects a kind of anarchistic sense maybe that people feel isn't possible now." No matter how brief, punk provided an indelible antecedent. And its skeptical raised eyebrow has continued to inform many of those who choose not to follow blindly.

"There's a lot of mythology that has grown up around the punk movement," says Mortensen. "Just like the '60s mythology. A lot of that is silly too.

A lot of people thought that punk is just violent. Really racist. That it's a bunch of uneducated, troubled kids breaking things and attacking people. But as you can see by the exhibition, these people were smart. They questioned authority. And questioned their lives."

That hovering question mark altered everything from typography (look to designer Steve Samioff's stripped-bare, declarative fonts that trip around and off the pages of Slash), gender politics (androgyny rules), music journalism (the sharp and wickedly incisive turns of Bessy's pen), film (David Lynch's "Eraserhead"), video (Peter Ivers' "New Wave Theater"). It crept into the world of spoken-word and performance art. It wasn't simply a thatch of driving guitars, the Escher-like maze of the mosh pit, but also the shadowed psyche of Raymond Pettibon's graphics. It became the scene center of lives of L.A.-based photographers—Gary Leonard, Ann Summa, Diane Gamboa, Frank Gargani, Jenny Lens, Melanie Nissen, Donna Santisi.

Taken as a whole, the idea was to reconfigure just what people thought *punk* was—its scope and texture.

The show bloomed out of a conversation Mortensen had with Perez in Spain while waiting for the companion catalog for his own Track 16 exhibition to come off the presses. "I didn't have anything lined up," recalls Perez. "Viggo suggested it, and it got me thinking." Roecker—known around the circle for his prodigious ephemera collection (he and Cervenka own Silver Lake's punk museum and performance space You've Got Bad Taste)—was awakened from a deep sleep by Mortensen's urgent phone call. "I told him, 'That's great! That's great!' " Roecker says and laughs with an eye roll. "But mainly to get him off the phone. It was *4 a.m.!*"

Cervenka admits initial wariness. "My first thought was: It would be great. And *I'm* not doing it!" she says. "I was just picturing 75 people standing there criticizing, 'That's not right. Why isn't *that* band in there?' "

But after only a few exploratory phone calls, the breadth of interest became clear. Much of Roecker's own collection was augmented by word-of-mouth support—people stopping by to unload boxes of memorabilia long stored in closets, garages and "Grandma's basement."

Deeply in the moment, punk's true power in L.A. was that it roundly shook awake the dozing. "It broadcasted the politics immediately. Unmistakably," says McKenna. "The clothing, the music, the graphics. There's a strong comparison in the artwork to political propaganda. You *know* what the message is."

Sustaining that level, that momentum, was far more difficult—but "Forming" underscores that the spirit is still willing—if not catching.

Cervenka considers the range of the idiom: "The performance to visual art, the folk and roots music to punk fashion, the statements that people were making were very broad—[it was] more than I ever realized, looking at them now. Everyone thinks that punk is X, the Bags, the Germs and the Screamers and then Darby died. But people are going to be shocked when they see that it's one-tenth of it really."

"What I think is cool," says Roecker, "is that so many of these people who were involved are now into things like computers or graphics. They work for themselves. They are still in the realm of influence. They can still inspire." □

Lynell George is a Times staff writer.

Track 16 Gallery

Posters like this one for the Screamers' show at the Whisky hang in frames on eggshell walls with authenticity-lending staple-gun scars.

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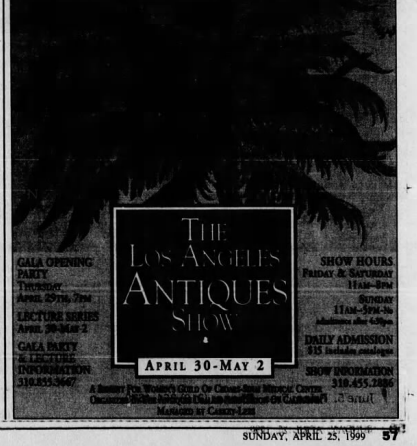

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